Passive Smoking Doesn't Cause Cancer, European Scientists Say

London, May 13 (Bloomberg) -- Passive smoking, or environmental tobacco smoke, doesn't cause lung cancer, said a group of European scientists who analyzed evidence.

The group, called the European Working Group on Environmental Tobacco Smoke and Lung Cancer, was funded by tobacco manufacturers B.A.T Industries Plc, Philip Morris Cos. and Rothmans International, a unit of Compagnie Financiere Richemont AG.

''There is no reason to believe that lung cancer is caused by breathing ETS (environmental tobacco smoke),'' said Jeffrey Idle, a professor of medicine at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, and the chairman of the panel of six scientists. He said the report doesn't deal with other ETS-related health issues.

''Our findings are entirely consistent with there being no elevated risk of lung cancer by exposure to ETS at work or in the home, either from a smoking parent or a spouse,'' the report concluded.

The scientists said the sponsors had not influenced the analysis or the report, and had agreed before the study that the report would be published regardless of the panel's conclusions.

''There was no interference, no input whatsoever from the sponsors,'' Idle said.

The panel concluded that there was insufficient evidence to link lung cancer and passive smoking.

The panel said that its review of 48 epidemiological, or population-based, studies showed that the increase in relative risk of getting lung cancer from exposure to ETS was so small as to be ''virtually meaningless in scientific terms.''

Some studies hadn't taken into account the proven effects of diet on lung cancer and the bearing this would have on the outcome, the panel said.

The scientists found that the concentrations of chemicals present in the air from ETS were ''extremely small,'' ranging from a seventh of the permitted level in the workplace (for nicotine) and a 2.6 millionth (for carbon disulfide). These permitted levels are set well below the point at which there is an observed adverse effect in animals.

Idle said studies testing the effects on animals of chemicals present in ETS sometimes used 100 to 10,000 times a human's normal exposure to the substance, effectively disabling the animals' ability to defend themselves against the toxins. He said that at lower levels, the human body's natural defenses eliminate the toxins.

The panel based its definition of ETS on the amount of chemicals present in the air if 25 percent of the occupants are smoking in a space allowing 36 cubic meters per person.

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The study clashes with earlier ones, particularly in the U.S., which have shown links between lung cancer in non-smokers and their exposure to passive smoke.

Dr. Anthony Springall, a panel member and a consultant on applied statistics, said the different conclusions stem from different approaches to information. He said biases in research have become apparent and standards for what is taken to show correlation have changed.

''It's been several years since an extensive review has been done in this area,'' said Springall.

-- Laura Frost in the London newsroom (44-171) 330 7598 / ap

(Story illustration: For graphs of B.A.T's, Philip Morris's and Richemont's share prices, see BATS LN, MO US, CFR SW <Equity> GPO; for company performance compared with its industry: COMP; for intraday share prices: GIP; for historical prices: HP, GP. Company news and background: BATS LN, MO US, CFR SW <Equity> CN, BQ. Industry news: NI TOB, NI HEA. Country, regional news: NI UK, NI US, NI EUROP.)

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